FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 51:1–12
John 12:24–33

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself."
John 12:32 (NRSV)

The central Christian belief is that
Christ's death has somehow put us right
with God and given us a fresh start.
Theories as to how it did this are another
matter. A good many different theories
have been held as to how it works:
what all Christians agree on is that it works.

C.S. Lewis
Mere Christianity

As we approach once again the great mystery of the cross,
open our hearts and minds to the old story.
Silence in us any voice but your own.
Startle us with the truth of the cross;
warm our hearts, and kindle in us
more love for you and for our neighbor.
Amen.

I never thought I would see the gospel in a Clint Eastwood movie, but I did. Nor did I ever think I would call Clint Eastwood a Christ figure. But a Christ figure, as it turns out, is exactly the role he plays in a 2008 film, *Gran Torino,* which Eastwood also directed and produced. Now this is a little risky, because his character, Walt Kowalski, is profane beyond profane and uses every racial stereotype and epithet known to humankind. A retired autoworker grieving the death of his wife, Kowalski fiercely and angrily protects his old way of life, his tiny Detroit house and yard, and his Gran Torino, a classy 1972 Ford, which symbolizes everything that once was and has changed and continues to change in his life—his old blue-collar neighborhood, for instance.

When a large fatherless family of Hmong people from Laos move into the house next door, Kowalski is dismissive, predictably racist, dragging out all the stereotypes, unkind and mean. He rejects the family's every attempt to be friendly. Slowly, a young girl and boy from the family break through: relationships begin to develop and grow. In spite of himself, he begins to be interested in them. They clearly like him a lot. He becomes a kind of mentor to both, almost a father figure.

The boy is being recruited by gangbangers. He resists, and so to demonstrate they mean business, the gang members brutalize and rape his sister. It is a moment for a classic Eastwood Dirty Harry, "Make My Day" response. He goes to the house where the gangbangers are, calls them to come out. They know he's there to exact revenge. He's shown them before that he has weapons—his old Korean War army rifle and pistol—and he's not afraid to use them. Their guns are ready. He reaches in his jacket. They fire. He dies in a hail of bullets and lies in the street, cruciform, in the form of a cross. In his hand, not a gun as they assumed, but a cigarette lighter. The police arrest the gang members. They have murdered an unarmed man. They will be in jail a long time.

Kowalski had decided that the only way to give the gift of life and hope and a future to his young Hmong friend and his family was to get rid of the gang that was terrorizing them, and the only way to do that was to give his own life away.

I was stunned. Something like that is exactly what Christians believe happened when Jesus Christ died on a cross. We believe that something profound, something beyond our ability to comprehend or imagine, something that makes all the difference in the world happened when Jesus died on the cross. Sometimes we even go so far as to say that he died for us and that he is our Savior.

It is a familiar story, but it moves me deeply every year. After a period of about three years in Galilee, during which Jesus gained a reputation and a large following by teaching and healing, he and his disciples go to Jerusalem for the Passover. The city is filled with religious pilgrims. When he goes out of his way to do things the Messiah is supposed to do, like ride on a donkey, the crowd erupts in patriotic fervor. "Hosanna!" they cry and spread palm branches in his path. It looks a lot like a political demonstration—not a good thing with the city filled with passionate religious zealots. So the religious authorities go to the political authorities, the Romans, and suggest that this Jesus is a real threat to public order and to Roman authority. Jesus is arrested, accused of fomenting an insurrection, claiming to be a king. There is already a king of the Jews, by the way. His name is Herod Agrippa. He collaborates with the Romans and they allow

him to act like a king. He and they take a very dim view of anyone else who claims to be a king.

So Jesus ends up on trial for his life, in front of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who is singularly uninterested in the whole matter except for the fact that he now has an angry mob on his hands. The crowd that welcomed Jesus to the city five days earlier is gone, replaced by a crowd screaming for his blood. Pilate tries to remain neutral. But he's a smart politician and does what he has to do: first, publically washes his hands of the matter, and then gives the order of execution. As was the custom, the prisoner, who had already been brutally tortured and humiliated, was forced to carry his cross to the place of execution, where he was nailed to it and lifted up and left to die. Crucifixion was a favorite Roman device to discourage would-be kings and troublemakers. He died there on a Friday afternoon, was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb of a man who was probably a sympathizer, Joseph. And for twenty centuries, 2,000 years, millions upon millions of people have regarded that death as somehow an act of God that makes all the difference in the world. When he said, before he died, "And I, when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself," it was, in fact, an accurate statement.

Christians have been thinking and talking about it ever since. The many attempts to find the right words to describe what the death of Jesus means are called atonement theories. Atonement is an old English word, "at–onement," a military term for what happens after enemies fight and agree to stop fighting and have peace: "at–onement."

There are many theories, many ideas about what happened when Jesus died and what it means. Jesus brings peace between God and human beings. Sometimes his death has been described as a ransom payment to buy back people who have been kidnapped. Sometimes the cross has been described as the final battleground between the forces of evil and good, with the forces of evil apparently winning the first round but ultimately defeated. Sometimes—often in fact—Old Testament sacrificial language has been used: the lamb that was slain for the sins of the people, "cleansed by the blood of the lamb"; sometimes cleansing language; sometimes healing; sometimes forgiving language. C.S. Lewis observed:

> The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. . . . A good many theories have been held as to how it works: what all Christians agree on is that it works.
> (*Mere Christianity*, p. 61, cited by Leann Van Dyk, *Believing in Jesus Christ*)

The most influential theory of all came from a thinker by the name of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the year 1000. Anselm wrote a famous essay, “Why God Became Man,” in which he argued that human beings insult God’s honor by disobeying and rebelling. Because God is just, human sin cannot be overlooked. Justice requires that sin be punished—by the death of the sinner. But God, in mercy, provides a substitute victim and not just any old victim, but God’s own perfect Son. We should have died. Jesus got what we deserve. God’s justice has been satisfied. Jesus paid the price we should have paid. Anselm’s ideas have been the dominant way Christians have thought about the death of Jesus ever since, influencing both Catholic and Protestant theology, gospel songs, and, of course, evangelical preaching. Anselm’s ideas are deeply meaningful—that somehow God’s mercy and love are expressed in the priceless gift of a son who goes to the cross. The great J. S. Bach hymn “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” is a strong expression of Anselm’s thinking:

> What thou, my Lord, has suffered
> Was all for sinners’ gain:
> Mine, mine was the transgression.
> But thine the deadly pain.

There is great truth here.

A younger contemporary of Anselm’s, a teacher and priest at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, had a very different idea of what the death of Jesus means. Abelard is remembered more for what he did, unfortunately. He fell in love with Heloise, they conceived a child, he was emasculated, and they were banished for life, he to a monastery, she to a convent, where they wrote letters to each other for the rest of their lives and where Abelard continued to think and write about the meaning of Jesus’ death. Abelard took issue with Anselm. In fact, he thought Anselm got it wrong. Maybe it was because he had experienced passionate love himself, but Abelard said the human problem is not so much rebellion and disobedience which offend God’s justice; the problem, Abelard wrote, is the lack of love for God and one another. Jesus came to show God’s love and awaken our love. Abelard wrote:

> The Son has taken upon himself our nature and taught us by word and example even unto death—he has more fully bound us to himself in love: with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from doing anything for him.

Abelard argued that the human heart is changed, warmed, motivated, by God’s love. That’s what the cross means.

His ideas are expressed in the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”:

> Were the whole realm of nature mine,
> That were a present far too small:
> Love so amazing, so Divine
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.

(I am indebted to Leanne Van Dyk for this material: see Believing in Jesus Christ*, pp. 74–88.)*

Does it matter what we believe? Well, yes it does. There is the lingering matter of what the substitutionary atonement—Jesus getting what we deserve—says about God, the lingering question about the morality of punishing an innocent victim. And there is the very important matter of the historical, cultural conviction that violence is redemptive. In a provocative article in the *Christian Century*, “God Does Not Demand Blood” (10 February 2009), Daniel Bell, a Lutheran theologian, argues that the whole idea of blood sacrifice, that someone has to suffer and die to put things right, is not only wrong theologically, but has played a major role in how we think and act socially and politically. He writes, “Christianity is permeated with images of a wrathful, angry God who demands blood and suffering and threatens to inflict terrible violence as just punishment for sin.” On the day I read that, I was walking down Chestnut Street on the way to the bank when I was accosted by a pleasant adolescent handing out pamphlets. I always feel sorry for young people standing on the corner on a cold and windy day handing out religious material, trying to be friendly. No one is paying any attention; some people are being downright rude. So mostly I smile, take a pamphlet, and say “Thank you.” “God’s Simple Plan of Salvation” was the title. I opened and read:

> “My friend—you are a sinner,” which is certainly true.
> “You are condemned to death,” which seems a little excessive, actually.
> “God gave his only Son to die in your place.”
> “Jesus had to shed his blood and die.”
> “He died in your/our place.”

Professor Bell argues that that kind of thinking—so predominant for a thousand years—has led us down a terribly wrong path. He writes, “God sets the precedent for what some scholars call the ‘Myth of Redemptive Violence’ . . . violence to set things right.” “Redemptive violence” is practiced in ancient cultures—blood violence: when your tribe is offended, you must respond in violence. When the neighboring tribe does something terrible to your tribe, you must put things right by exacting revenge. Bell argues that we still think like that mostly. Many people still argue that the way to deal with murder is to kill the murderer. He writes, “Since 9/11 we have been told that the only way to preserve and protect our life and

lifestyle is by unleashing violence. Reason and goodwill and diplomacy will not work—only brutal violence will save us." Those who argue otherwise are dismissed as weak. He argues that on the basis of "redemptive violence" we have become persuaded that it is all right to torture prisoners, lock up people indefinitely, curtail democracy and freedom.

Bell is not a pacifist and believes people and nations who do wrong and perpetrate violence on others must be held accountable. I agree. But I do think he is right to observe that violence saturates our culture. We are addicted to violence. "Violence saves" is the relentless message of movies, *Dirty Harry* (an Eastwood film), *Rambo, Lethal Weapon, Die Hard,* television shows, video games that invite young players to participate in "apocalyptic levels of violence"—blowing up cars, shooting policemen, bludgeoning victims with axes, infants and toddlers dressed cutely in battle camouflage. And guns: eighty school shootings since Columbine, twenty-nine school children murdered in Chicago this school year, two shootings a mile from here in Cabrini-Green last week. Every incident of gun violence brings out advocates for more guns, bigger guns, assault weapons, and the ridiculous argument that we would be less violent and less vulnerable if everyone packed a gun.

I think Professor Bell is onto something and that it begins in our hearts, those of us who are Christians. At the center of our faith is an act of profound violence, but it is not because God demands blood sacrifice but because God loves so profoundly that God assumes our humanness and walks all the way with us—in our life, our joys and sadness, our health and our sickness, and in our dying. God loves us so much that God will not respond to violence as we do, with more violence, but will absorb it. God will die our death with us and for us.

If you have ever loved deeply, you know a little about this. If you have ever watched a child, a spouse, a beloved suffer, you know that you wish you could somehow take on the pain, the suffering yourself. John Garvey, a popular columnist, wrote recently, "God has done this, this thing we wish we could do because of that in us that is like God, but can't do because we are not God. God became one of us to take on our suffering" (*Context*, January 2009).

It was for love that Jesus Christ died, to show us how deeply and profoundly we are loved by God, to warm our hearts and kindle our love for one another. That's what will save us and give us new life and new hope—a love from which nothing can separate us, a love that dies for us, a love that finally is how we will be judged: by how our hearts were warmed and changed, by how well we have loved.

The suffering teach us. A close and dear friend is near the end of his life. His wife, a Presbyterian pastor, keeps me and all her friends informed by going home from the hospital every evening and writing and sending out an update. Last week, after a particularly difficult day, she wrote, “On the last night of his life, Jesus told his friends, ‘I will not leave you alone. I will send the comforter.’ And he does.”

After I have read all the books, essays, articles, old and new theories of the atonement, I find I need more to deal with this. And so I find a way to visit the Art Institute and stand quietly for a few moments before the great paintings of the crucifixion as portrayed by artists of the Italian Renaissance.

A new discovery for me this year was *The Crucifixion* by Francisco de Zurbarán, a Spanish painter. He was commissioned in 1627 to create a painting for the sacristy of a monastery. It is a huge canvas, maybe 8' x 15'. The background is stark black, empty. The sole figure is Jesus on the cross. His body is strong, but relaxed. His midsection is draped in a white cloth. The figure appears to be lighted, almost shining, luminous. He is at peace in the midst of terrible, brutal violence. He will not reciprocate. It is finished. He will not resist. He will absorb it, all of it: the humiliation, the mocking, the pain, the violence. He will absorb all of human “redemptive violence” quietly, courageously, with resolve and great dignity. It is a powerful painting. It hangs on the wall of a large gallery with many other paintings, some religious, some not. I noticed that the visitors in the room could not help but look at this amazing painting of Jesus on the cross. I noticed that it was much quieter in this gallery than in any other. In other galleries—the Impressionists, for instance—there is an audible buzz, people talking, laughing. Here it was quiet, almost like being in church. It is a picture of humanity at its worst, its most violent and vengeful, killing the brightest and best. But more than that, that body on the cross is a picture of holy love, divine love that gives an only son for the life of this world, for your life and mine, for our salvation.

“And I, when I am lifted up,” he said, “will draw all people to myself.”

He does.

Amen.